



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ERNEST PSICHARI AND THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

Foremost among the evils of war is the sacrifice of young manhood. It is the loss of this flower of the race which, interrupting its continuity, cripples a nation for generations. Only during the Napoleonic wars has France suffered losses of this nature comparable to those of the past four years. From the early days of August of 1914 to the signing of the Armistice, her young heroes were falling on the "path of glory." Though this constant drain has been heavy in every calling of life, in none will it be felt more keenly than in the realm of letters. In vain do we attempt to "industrialize" literature: writers cannot, like farmers, manufacturers, and professional men, be trained to fill the depleted ranks. What talent—what genius, even—has been sacrificed in the five hundred or more young writers who have given their lives for France!

These heroes will all receive due recognition in time. For the present the critic, with only fragmentary information available, must confine himself to some one of them. Interesting as are such writers as Charles Péguy, Adrien Bertrand, Émile Nolly, Paul Acker, young André Lafont, and a score of others, of even greater significance was the career of Renan's grandson, Ernest Psichari—the best representative of "Young France" that could be selected, unless it be Péguy himself. For Psichari was a sublime instance of the lives sacrificed for France; and his struggle for religious faith makes his life the more interesting, especially since it was closely connected with the renaissance in France. His was indeed the spiritual effort of an entire race. The biographical, even confessional character of his work gives it additional importance.

Ernest Psichari was born in 1883. His father, Jean Psichari, a professor of philology at the University of Paris, was Greek. His mother, the daughter of Renan, represented a mixture of inherited influences: French, Breton, Catholic, Protestant. The Protestant stock came from Renan's wife, Cornélie Scheffer, who was of Dutch origin. Ernest received a thorough second-

dary education at the *lycées* Henri Quatre and Condorcet. At eighteen he published some poetry which, like that of his uncle Ary Renan, reveals the influence of the *décadents*, Verlaine and Mallarmé. His early interest in metaphysics found expression in annotations of Spinoza and Bergson. In 1902 he passed a brilliant examination for his *licence*, which corresponds roughly to our Master's degree.

At this stage of Psichari's career everything seemed to mark him as a disciple of his illustrious grandfather, in the cult of whom he had been brought up. But during the one year's military service that followed his *licence*, he encountered influences that changed the course of his life. The army and what it represented captivated him. In it he found that idealism which the prevailing skepticism of the time had impaired. Military life was to him a revelation. He realized that he had found his vocation. And so in 1904, instead of resuming his studies at the Sorbonne, the young soldier immediately reenlisted for three years.

This decision fell as a thunderbolt in the Dreyfus camp, to which Psichari's relations and friends belonged. To them such an apostasy seemed unthinkable. Had not the "Affair," after rending France from one end to the other, apparently left the anti-military party victorious? Says Psichari: "Pacifism was at its height. The army, especially if engaged in colonial service, was decried." But the enemies of the Army and of the Church were now to witness serious defections from their ranks—the triumph, so to speak, of what they had sought to destroy.

Psichari at first followed Péguy, who led the revolt. Péguy, a graduate of the Normal School, had been an anti-militarist, a revolutionary atheist, a militant Dreyfusite. Quite recently he had become a "nationalist" and a Roman Catholic, believing a spiritual and political regeneration of France equally necessary; and during the ten years that preceded the outbreak of the European war he was both the political and spiritual leader of the younger conservatives. RESTORE, RECONSTRUCT, REPLACE, became his slogan. He denounced the political anarchy, the moral degeneracy, the spiritual destruction that the apostles of socialism had created in the country; and from these

ills he drew a lesson. "When a man has failed in life," he wrote, "his one aim should be to enlighten his children. We have been constantly betrayed by our masters and our leaders. We shall see to it that our children are not betrayed by these same masters and leaders." He could not forgive the humanitarian ideologists for exposing France to the imminent peril of invasion. Had not Renan declared without a blush that if he had been compelled to enlist, he would have deserted? When in August, 1870, he saw the troops marching away along the boulevards, he declared that not one was capable of a virtuous act. And during the siege of Paris, when Berthelot suggested the necessity of inculcating in the coming generation the idea of vengeance, Renan, red in the face, cried, shaking his short arms: "No, no; let us have no vengeance! Sooner let France herself perish: we owe allegiance to a higher power, to duty and reason." Most bitterly of all things Péguy, and Psichari with him, resented the insulting attitude of those cynical pacifists who scoffed at the serious purposes of their children. What indeed could be more contemptible than the utterances of a dilettante like Gabriel Séailles, who in 1913 wrote sneeringly of the younger generation: "As yet they have spilled for their country only the ink with which they sought to blacken their elders, who were more deserving than they. Our young patriots can thus fight for their country forty years without the slightest injury." As Henri Massis, one of those slandered by Séailles, has recently said in protest, never was a generation so condemned by its leaders. In all truth these young people declared that their elders had "cut the sacred bond that unites the generations."

These unprecedented circumstances led to an unprecedented step on the part of Ernest Psichari. Convinced with Péguy, as he afterwards wrote in *The Appeal of Arms* (*L'Appel des Armes*), that they, not their fathers, represented old and legitimate authority, tradition, continuity, the race, he declared it necessary to "disavow their fathers for the doctrines of their grandfathers." Here we have in a nutshell the doctrine of the younger generation.

There was reason for them to take this stand. That France and her people were at the mercy of an insolent neighbor became

patent in the early years of the new century, despite the efforts of the "intellectuals" and the pacifists to bury their heads in the sand. The Moroccan war-clouds only confirmed the fact. Small wonder that the younger generation refused to accept such a menacing future! Had not their parents tried in vain to forget the defeat of 1870? Hence Péguy's conclusions, which Psichari hastened to reëcho: "A nation's territory, language, and civilization are determined by its soldiers." Everything, then, depended on France's army—the army that Psichari's early friends had decried and sought to paralyze. How natural that he should break with them! He reënlisted, as we have said, in 1904.

Though at the time a sergeant, Psichari, in his impatience for military activity, soon entered the Colonial Artillery as a private. Appointed quartermaster a few months later, he accompanied Major Lenfant on a mission to the French Congo. Here he remained two years (1906-1908), exploring, writing, and marvelling. At times his emotional life became keyed up to a high pitch. "Pendant quatre jours je fus plongé dans un abîme de félicité." The territory Major Lenfant explored was that ceded to Germany in 1911, but regained early in the war. It comprised chiefly the basins of the Sangha and the Logone, tributaries of the Congo. These regions offer to the traveller abundant subjects for study—peoples of many different kinds and conditions, an endless variety of interests. From his impressions the enthusiastic quartermaster made his first novel, *Lands of Sun and Slumber* (*Terres de Soleil et de Sommeil*), a book full of keen observation, of joy in the expanse of nature, of thirst for faith (though Psichari was still a pagan), of adoration of his commanding officer, of fond realization of dreams of military life, and above all of ecstasy in the thought ever foremost in his mind: "I am a French soldier."

But those "divine moments" and "unforgettable days" ended with the Lenfant mission. Having won the Military Medal, Psichari returned to France in 1908. While visiting relatives and friends in Paris, he arranged for the publication of *Lands of Sun*. He also made a trip to the village of Tréshugel, in Brittany, to see again "the pine-wood rising close by the peaceful shore, the foot-path where, as a little boy, he used to follow with his

eyes the aged Renan, bowed under the weight of his thoughts and his genius." During this sojourn in France he found more serious occupation in his studies at the military school of Versailles. Though not prizing military rank, Psichari was granted a commission of second lieutenant in September, 1909. A few months later he set out again for Africa—this time to spend three years in Mauretania.

He was eager to set foot once more upon African soil. He divided his time between military duties and spiritual meditation; to these main currents of his activity correspond the two autobiographical novels he wrote in Mauretania. The one, *The Appeal of Arms*, deals with military and political themes; the other, *The Journey of the Centurion*, with spiritual experiences. The country lent itself admirably to this dual activity—on the one hand, raids, marches, and surprise attacks; on the other, the vast horizons, the starry heavens, the enchanting moonlight, the profound solitude of the desert.

During this service in Mauretania the young lieutenant's military zeal lost none of its ardor. How could it in view of the grave Morocco crisis of 1911? He not only received the Military Cross, but was more than once cited for bravery in the Order of the Day. But more important for the biographer than his military exploits were his meditations. In these he made constant approach toward Christian faith. What a change has come over him since his mission in the Congo! At that time, not only was he unable to believe, but almost invariably, sometimes scoffingly, he seemed to prefer the Mohammedanism of the natives to Christianity. But he learned to know better both the Moors and their religion. "Thanks to the Moors, I now understand how pure and wholesome is that Christian air of France—the France I cursed at my departure."

So when in the winter of 1912 Psichari returned to his native country, he had accepted the Christian faith. He had already been baptized as a child according to the Greek rite. His reception into the Church is related by Monseigneur Gibier in the *Correspondant* of November 25, 1914. At his confirmation he took the name of Paul, as if in condonation of his grandfather's offences against the Saint; and now his one thought was to become

a priest and atone for that spiritual treason. "Yes, become a simple country curate in Lower Brittany, such as my grandfather would have been." To arrange for his theological studies, he went in the spring of 1914 to see the Director of the Seminary of Issy, where Renan had studied. It was decided that he should take his theological degrees in Rome.

These plans were upset by the events of August. But Psichari did not regret the war: it seemed like an answer to his prayers. Already in *The Appeal of Arms* he had expressed the wish that he might die in battle. On the second day he left Cherbourg with his regiment of Colonial Artillery. Eyewitnesses describe him as "intoxicated with the spirit of sacrifice." On the 20th of August he wrote to his mother: "Less than ever do I regret always having desired this war: the honor and greatness of France demanded it. It has come at the right time and in the right way." Two days later, during the retreat from Charleroi, after holding a strategic position for twelve hours against the surging waves of the enemy, he and his artillerymen all fell at their posts. They lie buried on the spot, at Rossignol, in Belgium, not far from Sedan. They probably wished no better epitaph than this line from Péguy's *Ève*:—

"Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans une juste guerre."

Of the three novels which are the literary fruit of this short life, the first, *Lands of Sun and Slumber* (1908), is little more than a diary of experiences in the Congo, with the corresponding reaction of the author's emotions. Though he gave himself up without reserve to the charm and mystery of the land, nevertheless the book is a mine of ethnographical information and vivid descriptions of natural beauty. Sometimes Psichari's style recalls Chateaubriand; still oftener, Pierre Loti; but he avoids Loti's abuse of "local color." Occasionally a passage reminds the reader of both older masters. But Psichari is a deeper thinker than Loti; though when he was writing the book he was almost as much of a pessimist. To a friend who expressed the hope that he might "find" Christianity in the Congo, Psichari replied: "Alas, no! Africa is not the abiding place of God, but rather the triumph of the individual." Yet he admires the local Mo-

hammedanism which, in contrast to its fanatical form in Algeria and Morocco, he calls "the good Islamism of the first centuries, the good word of Mohammed, the faith of shepherds . . . much more a religion of life than Christianity."

Of particular interest is what Psichari tells us about the natives and their customs. Though he prefers—or affects to prefer—their "primitive" civilization to that of the French, he admits frankly that certain tribes are "morally and physically weak, addicted to all the vices of our decadence." Thus the Bayas have an ancestral festival, the "Doko," which takes its name from the intoxicant they use on that occasion. After several days of drinking and obscene dancing, the men attain a high pitch of sensual excitation. Every form of eroticism, every perversion of sexual instinct, is known to the native Bayas.

One custom they have that is not without a certain poetic beauty, the "Labi," or Festival of Virginity. On this occasion the young men are initiated into the mysteries of sex. More than this, the festival comprises a series of texts designed to accustom them to the battles and perils of life. "Labi" means "danger"; and the main object of the festival is to train athletic men, to select for reproduction those most apt to increase the vigor and vitality of the race. It is evidently a form of the same Spartan idea that has been advocated by such modern sociologists as Malthus and Nietzsche.

The most charming episode of *Lands of Sun* is Psichari's portrait of his "friend" Sama, a Baya lad who accompanied him on his marches. "Sama is now my friend; he never leaves me; he is glad to carry my gun. . . . We chat. . . . How graceful is every attitude of his! His body is beautiful as a statue. Friend Sama, simple yet complex little soul, how I should like to know all about your life, penetrate the innermost secrets of your heart! . . . Sama has many faults. He is untruthful, cunning, given to vice, and a thief also. But he has an innate refinement which compensates for all that—a refinement peculiar to himself—an air at once of distinction and tenderness. . . . His manners are noble and gracious." How sad that the little fellow must die so young! The burning climate of the Logone region, to which Psichari takes him, is fatal to the Bayas from the Sangha.

It grieves the quartermaster profoundly to see Sama's frail body wither away. He depicts the burial in the melancholy tone of Chateaubriand's *Atala*.

Other topics of this book, which both instructs and delights, are the vast fields of various kinds of grain, the scenic beauty of the Congo river, the imposing city of Binder, with its uniform houses, the probable origin of these peoples, the tribal languages, and native literature. As for military life, Psichari was so enchanted with his mission that at one place he characterizes war as an "inexpressible poem of blood and beauty"—an expression he modified after embracing Christianity.

A less instructive but more finished work is *The Appeal of Arms* which Psichari dedicated to his adored Péguy. This novel—one, of the two written in Mauretania—was a close second in the contest for the prize which the French Academy awarded in 1913 to Romain Rolland for *Jean-Christophe*. According to the story, Maurice Vincent, the son of an anti-militarist teacher, comes under the influence of Captain Nangès, a sober-minded officer proud of his calling. Maurice, now twenty and well educated, is so captivated by the officer's descriptions of army life in the Soudan that he enlists, despite the opposition of his father. While in training under Nangès at Cherbourg, the young recruit realizes clearly his father's misconception of both the Army and the Church. Of what consequence are the theories of pacifists and quibbling skeptics in comparison to these two institutions that have stood the test of centuries? To Nangès nothing is such a transcendent mystery as the perpetuity of faith throughout two thousand years.

During a leave at home, Maurice discusses these questions with his father. Blinded by his humanitarian theories, M. Vincent becomes so enraged in the heat of the argument that he disowns his son. But all this only strengthens Maurice's convictions. Hearing now unmistakably the "call of arms," he accompanies Captain Nangès to Mauretania as a quartermaster in the Colonial Artillery. This crowns his desires. True, while in this glorious service he receives a wound which incapacitates him for military activity and spoils his project of marriage. But anyway, does not his beloved captain think more of him than Claire, the sweetheart

who plays a very minor rôle in the story? When Nangès, unable to endure the carping of French pacifists, embarks for Indo-China, Maurice decides to spend the rest of his days in government office work, ever dreaming of the charm of military life.

The fundamental purpose of the novel is to show the grave conflict that arose in France between the generation of 1880 and their children, who attained manhood about 1900. "The elder Vincent represented the generation who were twenty years old in 1880. They had seen the war of 1870, and they had forgotten it. Maurice had not seen the war—and he remembered it. . . . The father belonged to a race of slaves, and he was forever proclaiming the independence of liberated reason. The son's burning desire was to obey authority, both military and spiritual, and he belonged to the race of freemen." The conflict, as Péguy has said, was not simply between monarchical France and the France dating from the Revolution. It was a conflict between ancient France as a whole—pagan and Christian, monarchical and republican—and a certain "domination primaire" which established itself about 1881. This regime was not a republic, but simply an oligarchy of dangerous ideologists. Little wonder, then, that Maurice found it necessary to "disavow his father for the doctrines of his ancestors." The national chain of continuity, which the parents had broken, must be restored.

To portray this national conflict, Psichari depicts himself now as Nangès, now as Maurice. Like Maurice he rallies to the traditions of France; like Nangès he conceives the rôle of an officer as didactic, even mystic. From these ideas to "integral militarism," there is but a step. In fine, as Gustave Lanson expresses it, he turns against anti-militarism its own tactics, so that its dogmas appear reversed. Where the anti-militarists cry *à bas!* he cries *vive!* They detest the army as an anachronism in modern civilization; he consecrates it as eternal and opposed to modernity. As the anti-militarists, in their scorn, invariably associate the Army with the Church, so Psichari exalts them as inseparable. Are they not both manifestations of the absolute?

Conservative as these ideas may seem, they undoubtedly voice the sentiments of a large portion of the French people in the early years of the present century. Psichari's indictment of the

dilettantes, the anti-militarists, and the anti-clericals gives *The Appeal of Arms* a documentary value of the first rank. Nor is it without high artistic excellence, especially in the portrait of Nangès, which is drawn with a relief and a touch that make art and life indistinguishable. The character stands before us in flesh and blood.

The Journey of the Centurion, Psichari's last novel, takes its enigmatical title from the story in Saint Matthew (vii, 8-9) of the centurion who went to Jesus that He might heal his servant, who was lying at home sick of the palsy. It depicts the spiritual struggle of a soldier who makes a three years' journey in quest of supernatural truth. The novel, both in the personal, confessional element and in plot, resembles *The Appeal*. We have again a young officer, this time a lieutenant, Maxence, who is serving France in Mauretania, and very glad to be away from skeptical France. He has apparently taken Paris and its boulevards for France—a misconception which this "journey" will dispel. He needs food for his soul, which his father, a Voltairian epicure, has starved. "Maxence was born to believe, and to love, and to hope. He could not accept Truth and Purity as vain words."

Three years in the solitary desert, where "thought goes deep," remedy these ills. But even here Maxence is in reality still in France. Only "it is no longer the France of sophists and false savants. It is a virtuous, pure, simple France, a France armored with fidelity and crowned with true reason." Fidelity, in fact, appeals to this soldier as the foundation of all virtue. "But how, then, if he is a soldier of fidelity, can he reject the Church? If he looks kindly upon the eternal sword, why does he turn his eyes from the eternal Cross?" Maxence has come to the parting of the ways. "Either he will reject authority and the foundation of authority, which is the army, or he will accept all authority, both human and divine. As a man of fidelity he will not be unfaithful. In the system of order there is the priest and the soldier. In the system of disorder there is neither priest nor soldier. He will, therefore, choose the one or the other."

Naturally Maxence chooses the "system of order," and with good results; for already at the end of the second year of service he feels faith coming. But, he admits to his shame, this faith

he owes largely to the native Moors. It was their spiritual life that spurred him on. He could not say to them: "We French are believers," when he did not believe.

The decisive incident occurred at Port-Etienne, near the coast. While viewing here with some Moors the marvelous mechanism of the gigantic wireless station, Maxence pointed out to them the folly of attempting to resist French civilization. To his humiliation one of the Moors replied with dignity: "Yes, you French possess the kingdom of the world, but we Moors possess the kingdom of heaven. . . . All human science is yours. All human thought is there in the hollow of your hand. . . . Of man in his relation to man you know everything. But of the relations of man to God, of the visible to the invisible, of the natural to the supernatural, of chance to design—about all these mysteries you have scarcely begun to think." Maxence leaves Port-Étienne with the conviction that he is "a very poor man."

Into his last novel Psichari put his best thought and the most of himself. Parts of the book are unique. The scene of Maxence in the desert, "at the end of his thought, at the end of hope, in the sweat of interminable agony, with a flame consuming his breast," is one of tragic grandeur that would have been impossible without actual experience. Says Paul Bourget: "The pathetic pages in which Ernest Psichari relates the dialogue of his Maxence—that is, himself—with God in the desert recall the Mystery of Jesus. They are, to my mind, among the finest in our mystic literature." Of Ernest Psichari's novels, *The Journey of the Centurion* will best stand the test of time.

How surprising are the *revanches* of nature! Never for a moment could Renan have dreamed that his grandson would one day demand that the Army and the Church be restored to undiminished sovereignty. Nothing could be farther from the "vanity fairs" and the "jouissances délicates" that delighted the epicurean dilettantes of his time. Psichari's remark in a letter to Henry Bordeaux that the younger generation would not be merely "tourists in life" seems like a slap in his grandfather's face. For did not Renan call his own life "a charming stroll through the nineteenth century"?

WILLIAM H. SCHEIFLEY.

Indiana University.